

The Adoration of the Shepherds

by El Greco



David McTavish



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The Adoration of the Shepherds by El Greco:
New Findings on His Early Work

David McTavish

AGNES ETHERINGTON ART CENTRE, KINGSTON, CANADA

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FOREWORD

El Greco's small depiction of the *Adoration of the Shepherds* continues to surprise visitors to the Agnes Etherington Art Centre more than twenty years after its acquisition. Its painterly performance immediately delights the viewer, as does its affecting choreography of the scene. Even for those familiar with the Bader Collection of European Art, this small Greco-Italian masterpiece not only leaves an indelible impression but also provokes curiosity about how it made its way to Queen's University.

Although the Bader Collection centres on Dutch and Flemish art, especially the paintings of Rembrandt and his circle of pupils, followers and friends, the inaugural Bader gift in 1967 was a *Salvator Mundi* painted near Venice by Girolamo da Santacroce. Over subsequent decades the Baderts continued to enrich the Art Centre's holdings with works originating from outside of the Low Countries, mostly from Italy and by such prominent artists as Dosso Dossi, Luca Giordano, Giovanni Antonio Pellegrini and Sebastiano Ricci. The little El Greco fit within this wider scope of the Bader Collection, reflecting Alfred Bader's awareness of the European tradition, but also his keen interest in supporting teaching and research in Art History at Queen's.

David McTavish's arrival at Queen's in 1973 brought specialized expertise in Italian art to the still-young Art History program. Alongside academic pursuits, the young scholar contributed to various museum publications, and in 1986 embarked on a three-year stint as Curator of European Painting and Sculpture at the Art Gallery of Ontario. With this experience he returned to Queen's, first as Professor and Head of the Department of Art, and then also as Director of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, a position he held until 2001. As a scholar of European art, he was deeply engaged with the Baderts' activities as collectors and donors, and one of his first achievements was to persuade the couple to acquire the El Greco *Adoration*, then at auction in New York.

The Baders hoped that research and publication would guide this previously unknown work to its rightful place in the artist's accepted œuvre. McTavish's return to full-time academic work in 2001 provided the opportunity to focus on this work, and his findings have outstripped all expectations. Along the way, José Álvarez Lopera affirmed the painting's autograph status in his 2007 monograph on El Greco. But McTavish's research has unearthed swaths of information on multiple fronts, highlighted by the revelation of underdrawing through infrared reflectography carried out by Ron Spronk, and the relationship of this panel to the newly resurfaced *Baptism of Christ* now in Heraklion, Crete. Such results have repaid the author's persistence in pursuing a new understanding of this work, and his uncanny insight in pushing for its acquisition. We are pleased to present and celebrate these achievements with this publication.

David de Witt

Bader Curator of European Art, Agnes Etherington Art Centre



Fig. 1. El Greco, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, around 1567 (with later additions by the artist), oil and tempera (?) on panel, 23.5 × 18.5 cm. Kingston, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, gift of Isabel and Alfred Bader 1991.

The Adoration of the Shepherds by El Greco: New Findings on His Early Work

David McTavish

EL GRECO (1541–1614) is one of those artists who, like Vermeer (1632–1675), were rediscovered in the 19th century. Rehabilitated principally as a Spanish artist, which is understandable since he spent his mature years in Toledo, he was, however, Greek in origin, as his popular nickname indicates; but since *greco* is an Italian word, ties to Italy are also implied.¹

The Spanish paintings by El Greco restituted during the 19th century possessed enormous appeal for the most adventurous collectors of the day, especially for those who were also acquiring works by contemporary artists such as Paul Cézanne (1839–1906) and his fellow Impressionists and Post-Impressionists. Prime exponents were the New York sugar magnate Henry Havemeyer and his wife Louisine, a close friend of the American Impressionist Mary Cassatt (1844–1926). In 1901 Havemeyer even experienced a kind of aesthetic revelation in front of El Greco's *Burial of the Count of Orgaz* in Toledo. After a long silence he is reported to have pronounced it as "one of the greatest pictures I have ever seen; yes, perhaps the greatest."² Back in New York, the Havemeyers were to hang his *View of Toledo* together with Cézanne's *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, both now in the Metropolitan Museum. With such interest in El Greco's paintings, it is not surprising that today his work is so well represented in several museums in the United States.

Nor is it surprising that during the early years of fascination with El Greco much of the significant literature on the artist was written by Spanish scholars, such as Manuel B. Cossío, or by German scholars, such as Julius Meier-Graefe, who had laid the foundations of modern art history. In the early 20th century some historians began to investigate El Greco's sojourn in Italy. They did not always have the same opinion on the length of his stay or on his closest contacts, but they usually agreed that he had lived in Venice, though the exact details of his sojourn were missing, and that by 1570 he had moved to Rome. The Spanish and Italian paintings generally thought to be by El Greco in the early 20th century showed some stylistic homogeneity, even if their quality ranged considerably, and works principally by the master were often confused with those by his workshop. More recently,



Fig. 2. El Greco, *The Baptism of Christ*, 1567 (?), oil and tempera on panel, 23.5 × 18.1 cm. Heraklion, Municipality of Heraklion, on display at the Historical Museum of Crete.

some early paintings by El Greco have been discovered in Greece. Different in appearance, they indicate his initial training as an icon painter in the post-Byzantine tradition. Thus, the scholarship on El Greco has generally evolved from a focus on his most characteristic and also most mature paintings in Spain to his previous work in Italy to his earliest efforts in Crete—an order exactly in reverse to the direction of his own career.

Until recently, the small panel of the *Adoration of the Shepherds* in the Agnes Etherington Art Centre had received scant attention (fig. 1).³ The situation changed rapidly in December 2004, when El Greco's newly discovered and clearly related *Baptism of Christ* appeared at auction and was immediately purchased by the Municipality of Heraklion in Crete (fig. 2).⁴ Maria Vassilaki and Robin Cormack soon began to explore the possible links between the Heraklion *Baptism* and the Kingston *Adoration* in jointly written publications.⁵ In particular, they proposed that the two panels—each with an arched top and roughly similar dimensions—once formed part of a triptych on the model of El Greco's



Fig. 3. El Greco, Modena Triptych (open), around 1566–1567, tempera on panel, arched top, left wing: *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, 24.5 × 16.8 cm; central panel: *Allegory of the Christian Knight*, 23.5 × 16.8 cm; right wing: *The Baptism of Christ*, 24.5 × 17.9 cm. Modena, Galleria Estense.

well-known Modena Triptych (fig. 3),⁶ with the Kingston panel placed to the left of a lost central panel and the Heraklion panel to the right. In 2005 the *Baptism* underwent a thorough technical examination in the Conservation Department of the Benaki Museum in Athens which produced enlightening results, largely reinforcing Vassilaki and Cormack's hypothesis.⁷ Not only do marks along the outer left edge of the *Baptism* indicate where hinges were once located, but also gold leaf on top of bole, again along the outer left edge, suggests the gilding of a central panel's frame. Even more revealing and more controversial, the date *MDLXVII* (1567) or even possibly *MDLXVI* (1566) in gold pigment was discovered beneath the overpaint and varnish at the lower left.⁸ A mixed technique of egg tempera and oil was confirmed, as was the use of pigments generally employed in 16th-century Venetian painting, including powdered glass. In 2007 the late José Álvarez Lopera gave the Kingston and Heraklion panels full autograph status in his catalogue raisonné of El Greco's early paintings.⁹ Then, two years later, the proposal that the panels once

formed part of the same triptych was afforded wider public scrutiny when they were shown together in an exhibition in New York.¹⁰

More remains to be said, however, about the Kingston painting's execution, thanks to recent technical investigations, and also about its subject matter. Clearly, the Adoration of the Shepherds held special significance for El Greco: relatively early in his career he repeated the composition in a number of related versions, and during his maturity in Spain he continued to treat the subject with originality and personal conviction. A more detailed examination of these paintings in relation to Venetian art, especially night scenes, also helps to clarify El Greco's transition from Candia to Venice to Toledo.

FROM CRETE TO VENICE

El Greco's early life and career can be summed up as follows. Doménikos Theotokópoulos was born in 1541 in Candia, Crete, at the time a Venetian possession. Legal records refer to him as a master painter (*maistros sgrafos*) there in 1563 and 1566, and two signed (but not dated) icons testify to his thorough training in the post-Byzantine tradition, as well as his awareness of Italian 16th-century prints. Since both his father, Georgios, and his elder brother, Manousos, were employed by the Venetians as tax collectors, Doménikos would have had access to connections with La Serenissima, and in fact in November 1566 he is documented as being in contact with Luca Miani, a Venetian patrician, but nothing more is known about his eventual move to Venice.¹¹ He is noted as still being in Candia in December 1566, when he received permission to sell a Passion of Christ on a gold ground at a lottery. He is specifically recorded as being in Venice only once—in a document dated 18 August 1568 regarding topographic drawings he had given to the Venetian merchant Manolis Dakypris who was to send them to the well-known cartographer Georgios Sideros (Calapodan) in Crete. Nonetheless, it is generally assumed that El Greco arrived in Venice in 1567 (or 1568 at the very latest) and stayed there until 1570. The latter date is more securely fixed, because on 16 November 1570 the manuscript painter Giulio Clovio (1498–1578) wrote to his patron Cardinal Alessandro Farnese recommending a young native of Candia and follower of Titian (around 1488–1576) (“un giovane Candiotto, discepolo di Titiano”), who had recently arrived in Rome. The identity of the “giovane Candiotto” is widely agreed to be El Greco, who did indeed live in the Palazzo Farnese in Rome until 1572. By 18 September of that year he was sufficiently established to have been accepted into the Accademia di San Luca in Rome. A subsequent sojourn in Venice, although undocumented, is taken for granted by many scholars.¹² By 1576 El Greco had moved to Toledo, which became his permanent place of residence.

Fig. 4. El Greco, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, around 1570–1572, oil on canvas, 114 × 104.5 cm. Kettering, Northamptonshire, Boughton House, collection of the Duke of Buccleuch and Queensbury.



The general composition of the Kingston *Adoration* is found in several other paintings attributed to El Greco, all of which are 20th-century additions to his oeuvre.¹³ No doubt El Greco's earliest surviving treatment of the Adoration of the Shepherds is the left inside wing of the Modena Triptych, the small tabernacle, signed in capital letters *CHEÏR DOMÉNI/KOU* (by the hand of Doménikos), that Rodolfo Pallucchini discovered in a cupboard in the Galleria Estense, Modena, in 1937 and that has since functioned—not without controversy—as a *trait d'union* between El Greco's post-Byzantine roots in Crete and his quickly evolving mature style in Italy.¹⁴ In the aftermath of Pallucchini's 1937 discovery and publication of the Triptych, a number of variations on the *Adoration of the Shepherds* panel came to light, evidently executed in different contexts that are still far from clear. Making copies was indeed a practice that El Greco pursued throughout his life—prompted initially no doubt by his training as an icon painter, where visual images were traditionally repeated with only minor changes, and then reinforced by his experience in Venice.



Fig. 5. El Greco, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, mid-1570s, oil on panel, 24.5 × 16.5 cm. Location unknown (formerly Paris, collection of Carlo Broglio).



Fig. 6. El Greco, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, around 1572–1576, oil on panel, 32 × 21 cm. Location unknown (formerly Paris, collection of Charles Brunner,).

The first variant to be introduced to the literature is the fairly large canvas belonging to the Duke of Buccleuch and Queensberry at Boughton House, Kettering, which Ellis Waterhouse published as a work by El Greco in 1951, and which has since found general acceptance (fig. 4).¹⁵ The next year Pallucchini published a small panel once in the Carlo Broglio collection, Paris (now untraced), and dated it to El Greco's "second Venetian period," that is to say, the mid-1570s (fig. 5).¹⁶ Then in 1954 Martin Soria introduced another panel, formerly in the Charles Brunner collection, Paris (now untraced), and dated it to the "second Venetian period 1572–1576" (fig. 6).¹⁷ In 1986 Pallucchini published another small variant, on copper, then with Piero Corsini Inc., New York, and now in the San Diego Museum of Art, dating it to around 1574–1575 (fig. 7).¹⁸ The Kingston painting is the most recent addition to this group. Purchased in 1991 at auction in New York, it is executed in oil on a wood panel, and it alone has an arched top, similar to the panels of

Fig. 7. El Greco, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, date uncertain, oil on copper, 24.1 × 19.7 cm. San Diego, San Diego Museum of Art.



the Modena Triptych. A vertical wood strip approximately 1 cm wide was added to the left margin at some unknown date, and the entire image has been “framed” and backed in oak. The Kingston *Adoration* measures 23.5 by 18.5 cm, in contrast to Modena *Adoration*, which measures 24.5 by 16.8 cm. Vassilaki and Cormack have dated the Kingston panel to around 1567, and Álvarez Lopera to around 1569, but it was also worked on at a later date, as we shall see.

While the Kingston *Adoration* bears striking similarities in size, shape and composition to the related panel of the Modena Triptych, the differences are equally, if not more, revealing. In its construction, the Modena Triptych conforms to a type of devotional image once produced in Venice and elsewhere in Italy but which had fallen out of fashion by the second half of the 16th century. In Crete, however, small portable triptychs continued to be made. Moreover, the gilded carving around the Modena Triptych’s central panel is distinctive of local Candián craftsmanship. Indeed, it is virtually duplicated in the decorative frames of triptychs by a Cretan contemporary of El Greco, Georgios Klontzas (around 1540–1608).¹⁹ While the carpentry of the Modena Triptych is almost



Fig. 8. Michele Damaskinos, *The Nativity*, around 1575–1580, tempera on panel, dimensions unknown. Venice, San Giorgio dei Greci.

certainly Cretan, the location where El Greco painted the six panels—in Crete or Venice—continues to be the subject of much debate. No documentary evidence has ever been connected with the execution of the Modena Triptych. And the provenance of the Triptych cannot be traced prior to the early 19th century, when it belonged to Tommaso Obizzi of Castello del Cataio near Padua. Nor are there any visual clues, such as heraldic devices, in the Triptych itself to aid in identifying a particular patron, though the choice of subjects and their representation cannot be entirely arbitrary.²⁰ If the Triptych were not the product of a specific commission—as seems possible in the absence of any evidence to the contrary—it appears, nevertheless, to have been executed with a potential clientele in mind. It is surely significant that the artist went out of his way to parade an abundant knowledge of 16th-century Italian art.²¹ And nowhere is this more conspicuous than in his depiction of the *Adoration of the Shepherds*.

Fig. 9. El Greco, *The Adoration of the Shepherds* (left wing of the Modena Triptych when open), around 1566–1567, tempera on panel, 24.5 × 16.8 cm (arched top). Modena, Galleria Estense.



The subject of the shepherds worshipping the newborn Christ Child was popular in Renaissance art, and the Biblical text, which appears only in the Gospel of Luke (2:8–16), was well known. In Byzantine art, however, the shepherds themselves do not figure prominently. There, the Nativity was traditionally shown in a cave, with Mary reclining on the ground and, near her, the Christ Child tightly bound in swaddling clothes, lying in a rectangular stone manger.²² Beyond the confines of the cave it was common to show a number of related events, including the angel announcing Christ's miraculous birth to the shepherds (typically at the upper right). Until the 14th century the same compositional formula was widely employed in the West.²³ Then, the cave began to be replaced by the angular frame of a rustic stable, and the convention of showing a reclining Mary gave way to images of her humbly kneeling and, with her hands held together, adoring the Christ Child naked on the ground before her. By the second half of the 15th century depictions of the shepherds' arrival at the stable started to gain some currency. In Greek Orthodox



Fig. 10. Giovanni Britto, after Titian, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, around 1535–1540, woodcut, 39.6 × 50.3 cm. London, British Museum.

art, however, the traditional formula predominated, and the shepherds' visit to the stable seems not to have been represented. Even in San Giorgio dei Greci, the Greek community's church in Venice, the old compositional formula persisted, as can be seen in the beautiful *Nativity* by Michele Damaskinos (around 1550–around 1592), which dates from around 1575–1580, well after El Greco's documented stay in the city (fig. 8).²⁴

In his 1937 publication Pallucchini astutely identified the remarkable anthology of visual sources comprising the Modena *Adoration of the Shepherds* (fig. 9).²⁵ To a degree that was exceptional—even at a time when artists routinely enhanced their compositions with appropriations from earlier art—El Greco entirely composed his *Adoration* with borrowings from other 16th-century Italian artists, all in fact from prints of this subject. For his overall composition he relied heavily on the large woodcut by Giovanni Britto (around 1500–after 1550) after Titian's emphatically rustic *Adoration of the Shepherds*. Sent to the Duke of Urbino in 1532–1533, Titian's painting (now in poor condition in the Gal-



Fig. 11. Parmigianino, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, around 1527, etching and engraving, 12.1 × 7.9 cm. London, British Museum.



Fig. 12. Giulio Bonasone, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, around 1561–1565, etching, 32.1 × 14.9 cm. London, British Museum.

leria Palatina, Florence) was popularized by Britto's woodcut (fig. 10).²⁶ El Greco not only appropriated Titian's architecture, with its rectilinear stable and angular hole in the thatched roof and its engaged column and rusticated pier at the right, but he also adopted and then adapted his principal figures. Building on the Gospel text and well-established visual traditions, Titian had beautifully articulated the sudden drama of the humble shepherds, breathless from the fields, as they first catch sight of the newborn Saviour and fall reverently to their knees. Since Britto's woodcut is in reverse to Titian's painting, the shepherds approach from the right, and the shepherd in the foreground courteously removes his broad-brimmed hat with his left hand, a gesture both homely and eloquent, and irresistible to subsequent artists.²⁷

El Greco generally repeated the arrangement of the woodcut's figures, as well as virtually replicating the meditative Virgin Mary, but he had to accommodate the oblong composition to a vertical format, and in doing so modified Titian's dignified naturalism.

His composition became more concentrated and the effect more rhetorical as he added and substituted figures from other prints. He eliminated altogether the woodcut's Joseph and the boy leaning over the wall with a candle, but replaced the latter with a different Joseph, in profile and theatrically stretching out his left arm, which is a precise quotation from an etching by Parmigianino (1503–1540) of the *Adoration of the Shepherds* from around 1527 (fig. 11).²⁸ To the right of Mary, El Greco brought the kneeling shepherds closer to the manger and rearranged them—details inspired by an ambitious etching of the *Adoration* by Giulio Bonasone (around 1510–after 1576) from around 1561–1565, which in turn was indebted to Parmigianino's etching and perhaps to Britto's woodcut (fig. 12).²⁹ El Greco relied on Bonasone's print not only for the shepherds—most noticeably the youthful bare-chested one—but even more for the two conversing women at the right (the two midwives?) and the heavenly choir in the sky. Whether or not it was his goal, El Greco had thus created a composition that was an effective blend of Venetian naturalism and Central Italian Mannerism.

While El Greco's compositional sources were uniformly Italian, his Modena *Adoration* does not look anything like 16th-century Italian painting. Especially alien are the fiery sky and the abrupt changes of hue and tone among the figures.³⁰ Even when allowances are made for the visual effects of egg tempera, his use of colour, with an insistent repetition of clear red and mustard yellow and an emphasis on brilliant white for highlights, is foreign to contemporary Italian practice. In sum, while the artist clearly set out to represent a Western subject and to create an Italianate composition—and succeeded by ransacking monochromatic prints of the appropriate theme—he ended up producing an image that falls short of the tonal shading and atmospheric harmony typical of 16th-century Italian painting. This situation could be the result of his immaturity as an artist, or at least his inexperience in executing paintings with these effects. However, it is also probable that the artist lacked sufficient first-hand experience of Italian painting (as opposed to his proven knowledge of Italian prints), which could have served as helpful models. In this light, it is tempting to conclude that the Modena Triptych must have been executed in Candia.³¹ After all, Italian prints were in plentiful supply in Crete, and El Greco himself had made use of them in his earliest extant works.³² If executed in Candia, it seems evident, however, that El Greco was hoping to impress an Italian clientele, whether in Crete or in Italy itself. And in this regard, the proposal that the Triptych was done in Venice, at the earliest possible moment, also has much to commend it. So on balance, it still seems unwise to be too categorical about the Triptych's place of execution.

Although the Kingston panel retains much of Titian's *Adoration*, which El Greco

reused in the Modena Triptych, as well as some of the figures from the Parmigianino and Bonasone etchings, it also reveals specific differences in detail. Most conspicuously, El Greco has replaced the horizontal band of seated choristers (based directly on Bonasone's print) with three frolicking baby angels and dramatic clouds.³³ At the middle level, Joseph's right hand is clearly shown, whereas it is covered entirely by his cloak in the Modena Triptych and its source, Parmigianino's etching.³⁴ The woman at the furthest right turns her head to talk to her companion, instead of looking out at the viewer as in the Triptych and Bonasone's etching, while Mary is the one who now looks outward. Still kneeling, she reverently clasps her hands and is clad in conventional red and blue, in place of only red. The shepherds have also been rearranged: the eldest and youngest have switched places; the middle shepherd, quoted from Bonasone's etching, is shown with his chest partly covered up and holding the lamb horizontally rather than upside down; and the ox and ass have been moved directly behind the Christ Child's manger.

Most of these changes indicate that El Greco had abandoned his strict adherence to the Parmigianino and Bonasone prints. On the other hand, a few details replicate Britto's woodcut more precisely. Thus, in the Kingston panel (and in some of the other variants), the roof's bare rafters more accurately imitate the equivalent part of the woodcut, just as the hat with its turned-up brim (held by the shepherd in the foreground) is more closely repeated. Such details imply that El Greco still had access to Britto's woodcut and must have again scrutinized it with a penetrating eye.³⁵

TECHNICAL REVELATIONS AND STYLISTIC ALTERATIONS

Recent technical examination has revealed that El Greco undertook several of these changes while in the very process of painting the Kingston panel. With the naked eye, it has always been easy to detect considerable underdrawing on the panel. Now, infrared reflectography shows additional underdrawing hidden by and distinctly different from the top layers of opaque paint (fig. 13).³⁶ The underdrawing indicates, for instance, that El Greco first drew the hat held by the shepherd in the foreground with a flat brim, as in the Modena Triptych, and then painted over it with the brim turned up. Similarly, he first drew Mary and the two women at the right in the poses of the Triptych, only to modify them in the subsequent layers of paint. Much more substantially, he again followed the Modena Triptych for the upper section of the panel by including the entire group of choristers in the underdrawing, but he must have found this unsatisfactory and, at some still undetermined moment, completely covered it up with the three baby angels and dramatic clouds.



Fig. 13. Infrared reflectogram of El Greco's *Adoration of the Shepherds*. Kingston, Agnes Etherington Art Centre.

The underdrawing demonstrates that El Greco closely followed the Modena Triptych in his initial composition for the Kingston *Adoration*—as if to make an almost exact copy (and so must have had the original or some surrogate close at hand)—and then, as he continued to work on the panel, and no doubt as he gained greater knowledge of Italian art (especially Venetian art), he either revised his earlier design or obliterated it altogether. This new information ties the actual genesis of the Kingston panel even closer to the Modena Triptych and reinforces the attribution of both to the same artist. In addition, it indicates a chronological sequence supporting what the naked eye had inferred—that the Modena Triptych was painted first and the Kingston panel followed. It also suggests that the Kingston *Adoration* likely predates the other variants, as most of the changes actually took place during the execution of the Kingston panel. These deductions, in turn, point to a start date close to the inscribed *MDLXVII* or *MDLXVI* (1567 or 1566) on the Heraklion *Baptism*.

Further technical examination in the form of radiography has revealed that there were once hinges along the outer right edge (fig. 14). This discovery neatly reinforces

Fig. 14. X-radiograph of El Greco's *Adoration of the Shepherds*. Kingston, Agnes Etherington Art Centre.



Vassilaki and Cormack's supposition that the Kingston and Heraklion paintings were originally the lateral panels of a triptych similar to the Modena Triptych. The presence of hinges also implies that the Kingston panel was considered to be finished, even though some of the paint surface looks incomplete today.

In addition to the compositional changes, the Kingston *Adoration* and the other variants involve at least three other changes that depart from the Modena *Adoration*. Technically, all the variants exploit the use of oil paint, at least in part;³⁷ stylistically, they all present a tonal unity; and iconographically, they follow the Gospel passage that the shepherds were "keeping watch over their flock by night" and thus unequivocally depict the Adoration as a nocturne.

Egg tempera was typically used to paint icons from the 8th century onward.³⁸ Given his origins, El Greco would have soon learned to handle the medium, and predictably the two surviving icons signed by him are executed in tempera and gold. The Modena Triptych is also done in tempera. In contrast, El Greco's mature works are almost always

painted in oil on canvas, in line with contemporary practice in Venice and increasingly elsewhere in the West.³⁹ In recent years a mixed technique of tempera and oil has also been identified in a number of El Greco's panel paintings, including *The Entombment of Christ* in Athens, *A View of Mount Sinai* and the recently discovered *Baptism* in Heraklion, *The Pieta* in Philadelphia, and *The Adoration of the Name of Jesus* in London.⁴⁰ It may be assumed that the Kingston panel was also executed in a mixed technique, but proof is lacking because its paint layers have not yet been scientifically analyzed. Nonetheless, its handling—from nervous, flickering highlights to solid matte areas—fits nicely with the paintings just mentioned. The calligraphic highlights on the sleeve of the shepherd beside the ox, for instance, are comparable to those of the veil of the woman behind the swooning Virgin in *The Entombment of Christ*, just as the refulgent clouds, with their densely fused textures, are analogous to the dramatic sky in *A View of Mount Sinai*.⁴¹

Stylistically, all the variants of the Modena *Adoration* possess a new tonal coherence, from the deepest shadow to the highest light. While El Greco may not have achieved total consistency, he was obviously attempting to relate the light sources systematically to the surrounding three-dimensional solids. Ironically, the two major sources of light are in fact supernatural: the naked Christ Child and the heavens above. In particular, El Greco took pains to show how the Christ Child's light shines in all directions and illuminates every surface around it. This all-embracing radiance thus highlights the right side of Mary's gown as well as the underside of her right hand, and across from her, the edge of the kneeling shepherd's left arm and his knees. The artist's new interest in naturalistic modelling is also seen in the engaged column at the right, painted with a gradual transition from light to dark instead of the flat vertical ribbon of highlight in the Modena *Adoration*.

El Greco's introduction of supernatural lighting, together with his endeavours to create a tonal unity, must have coincided with his determination to depict the Adoration at night. While Britto and Bonasone represented the subject as a nocturne, El Greco completely ignored this aspect in the Modena *Adoration*. But in all the variants, it is a distinguishing feature—one that both complies with the scriptural passage in St. Luke and conforms to a fashion quickly gaining currency in 16th-century Venice.

Literary texts were undoubtedly the inspiration for the supernatural light, but artists had already been painting such effects in their Nativities for some time. It was a commonplace to equate Jesus Christ with light, the best-known utterance coming from Christ himself (John 8:12): "I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life."⁴² In addition, El Greco would have been familiar with the more specific, non-Biblical source for the Nativity, the *Revelations* of St. Bridget



Fig. 15. Jeremias Falck, after Lorenzo Lotto, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, around 1665–1660, engraving, 32.6 × 38.2 cm. London, British Museum.

of Sweden, either through direct knowledge of the text or its depiction in other works of art.⁴³ The significant element is the light that emanates as divine radiance (*splendor divinus*) from the newborn Christ Child and outshines all material light (*splendor materialis*), even though in the Kingston *Adoration* El Greco omitted the candle usually held by Joseph (or another attendant) to represent the natural light of the real world.

NOCTURNES IN VENICE

In Venice, El Greco would have had ample opportunity to see, or at least hear about, a growing number of night scenes. Giorgione's painting of "una notte, molto bella et singolare" (a very beautiful and unusual nocturne), which Isabella d'Este yearned to acquire in October 1510, is often thought to be just this type of Nativity, if not actually an Adoration of the Shepherds.⁴⁴ Titian's *Adoration of the Shepherds* of 1532–1533 for the Duke of Urbino,

again a private commission for a secular setting, was certainly shown at night.⁴⁵ At the same time, artists who had had extensive experience on the mainland contributed hugely to the fashion for nocturnes. Foremost among these was Lorenzo Lotto (around 1480–1556), who had completed a number of imaginative nocturnal Nativities, evidently all for domestic settings, both on the *terra firma* and in Venice itself.⁴⁶ In his *Lives*, Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574) mentions Lotto's "Natività di Cristo finta in una notte" (nativity of Christ as a nocturne) in the Venetian house of the Florentine Tommaso da Empoli. It was, as Vasari says, "bellissimo, massimamente perchè vi si vede che lo splendore di Cristo con bella maniera illumina quella pittura" (very beautiful, above all because you see the brilliance of Christ lighting up the painting in a beautiful way), and it featured a portrait of the Venetian patrician Marco Loredan as one of the full-length shepherds adoring the baby Jesus.⁴⁷ Lotto's painting is now lost, but its grand composition is plausibly known through a 17th-century engraving by Jeremias Falck (around 1609–1677) (fig. 15).⁴⁸ A private market for nocturnal Nativities certainly continued into the 1540s, and Lotto persisted in supplying it.⁴⁹

Elsewhere in his *Lives*, Vasari attributes Tommaso da Empoli's painting to Giovanni Gerolamo Savoldo (around 1480–after 1548),⁵⁰ the artist from Brescia who had also worked extensively on the mainland and who settled in Venice around 1520. As Vasari knew full well, Savoldo, too, was known for his nocturnes.⁵¹ Paolo Pino had indeed praised his work for its "certe oscurità con mille discriptioni ingeniosissime, e rare" (certain darknesses with a thousand extremely ingenious and unusual effects) in his 1548 *Dialogo di Pittura*.⁵² Among Savoldo's night scenes are impressive Nativities dating to around 1535–1540 which do not include the shepherds but do depict the Christ Child's spiritual light radiating in all directions and a devout Mary with clasped hands, both details represented by El Greco.⁵³ Around 1540 Savoldo completed an equally meditative *Nativity* for a more public Venetian location, an altarpiece for the Observant Franciscan church of San Giobbe (fig. 16). Though not a true nocturne, Savoldo's altarpiece includes a twilight sky over the distant hills, where the Annunciation to the shepherds takes place. The three shepherds then come forward and look through openings in the stable. The bearded shepherd at the left with particularized features must be a portrait.⁵⁴

Savoldo is last mentioned as still alive in 1548, and Lotto moved permanently to the Marches the next year. By then a new generation of Venetian artists had begun to specialize in night scenes, for both private and public settings. Among such artists, Andrea Schiavone (around 1500–1563), who had known Lotto, painted a conspicuous nocturnal *Adoration of the Shepherds* in one of his first public commissions, the choir loft in the church of the

Fig. 16. Giovanni Gerolamo Savoldo, *The Nativity*, around 1540, oil on panel, 180 × 127 cm. Venice, Chiesa di San Giobbe.



Carminie in Venice (fig. 17).⁵⁵ Dating from 1552–1553, Schiavone's *Adoration* includes an interpretation of Mary (ultimately derived from Britto's woodcut after Titian) that finds echo in the Modena *Adoration*, and a night sky and a warm glow of colour that go even further in anticipating El Greco's subsequent variants of the subject. And the greyhound at the left reappears almost exactly as in the Kingston and San Diego *Adorations*.⁵⁶ In addition, the vigorous brushwork, which Ridolfi (almost a century later) claimed was too emphatic and better seen at a distance, would surely have appealed to El Greco.⁵⁷

There can be no doubt about El Greco's admiration for Tintoretto (1519–1594), whose enormous and recently completed *Crucifixion* (1565) in the Scuola Grande di San Rocco he called the best painting in the world.⁵⁸ In particular, the Cretan must certainly have looked with utter fascination at Tintoretto's impetuous technique of applying oil paint



Fig. 17. Andrea Schiavone, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, 1552–1553, oil on panel, 95 × 226 cm. Venice, Chiesa di Santa Maria del Carmine.

to canvas. For our purposes, it is also pertinent that since the late 1540s Tintoretto had been rendering large-scale religious subjects as dramatic nocturnes—his *St. Roch Healing the Plague-stricken* in the church of San Rocco is a case in point—but that the theme of the Adoration of the Shepherds seems not to have been among them.⁵⁹ Even as late as 1578 to 1581, when Tintoretto painted an enormous and novel *Adoration of the Shepherds* for a sidewall in the Sala Superiore of the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, he did not produce a thoroughly consistent nocturne.⁶⁰

Jacopo Bassano (around 1510–1592), like El Greco, depicted the Bethlehem shepherds throughout his life. His earliest interpretations, horizontal in format and all apparently destined for secular settings, also relied heavily on Britto's woodcut after Titian's *Adoration*.⁶¹ Only in 1568 (some thirty years after he first depicted the subject) did Bassano undertake an *Adoration of the Shepherds* for a religious setting, the high altar of the church of San Giuseppe in his native Bassano.⁶² This was exactly when El Greco was in Venice, and the young Cretan possibly travelled the fifty kilometers northwest of the city to inspect the newly installed canvas. Being an altarpiece, the painting is vertical in format, and four baby angels that push back dark clouds to let rays of heavenly light descend on the Christ Child enliven the upper part. However, Bassano's *Adoration* is shown at dawn instead of at night, and his sculptural figures are solidly modelled with careful shading, in contrast

to El Greco's flickering linear brushwork. To be sure, Bassano did develop a distinctive technique of broken brushwork and did specialize in nocturnes—even being called the “inventor of the true painting of night scenes on canvas” in 1577—but these traits came to fruition in the 1570s, after El Greco had left Venice.⁶³

EL GRECO AND TITIAN

Whereas Tintoretto's and Bassano's pre-1570 paintings manifest only limited connections with El Greco's *Adorations*, Titian's works offer more suggestive affinities. Evidently, Titian had not done an *Adoration of the Shepherds* since his 1532–1533 panel for the Duke of Urbino. However, he executed much (though not all) of his more recent work in a darker tonality, including the *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence*, installed in the church of the Crociferi (now Gesuiti) by 1559, which he painted as a dramatic nocturne.⁶⁴

Another painting that would surely have been even more compelling for the young Theotokópoulos was the *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence* requested by King Philip II of Spain for the high altar of the new church of the monastery at El Escorial. Underway in Titian's studio from 1564, it was dispatched to Spain on 3 December 1567 (fig. 18).⁶⁵ Titian had based the Escorial altarpiece on his Crociferi *St. Lawrence* but thoroughly reworked most details, reducing the recession into the architectural setting and forcing the figures into an agitated lateral sweep across the front of the canvas. The emotional intensity was also greatly increased: the figures with frantic gestures and excited eyes; the colour with brilliant flashes of green, red and blue; and the light of the fire beneath the gridiron and from the torches and crescent moon with fitful and restless mobility. If El Greco had indeed settled in Venice by late 1567 and had had access to Titian's studio (as Giulio Clovio's 1570 letter implies), he would surely have known the painting well. Whatever the actual relationship between the revered master and the Greek emigrant, El Greco's own work—including his various *Adorations*—stands as sufficient testimony to his deep and abiding interest in what Charles Hope has called “arguably the supreme masterpiece of Titian's last years and the most exciting night scene of his entire career.”⁶⁶

With knowledge of Titian's Escorial *St. Lawrence*, El Greco would have found Venetian sanction for the practice of executing copies, and, should changes be made, for undertaking these changes on the copy itself.⁶⁷ Recent radiography of the Escorial *St. Lawrence* has indeed revealed that Titian started by closely repeating the composition of his earlier Crociferi version, and then proceeded to introduce significant alterations in the subsequent paint layers, and continued to make changes until the painting was finished—just as El Greco did in the Kingston *Adoration*.⁶⁸



Fig. 18. Titian, *The Martyrdom of St. Lawrence*, 1564–1567, oil on canvas, 440 × 320 cm. El Escorial, Iglesia Vieja.

A distinctive feature of Titian's second *St. Lawrence* is the way the myriad smudges and flicks of pigment animate the surface of the painting and at times give it a vibrancy almost, but not quite, independent of the objects represented. These virtuoso effects are more pronounced both in terms of technique and illusion than in Titian's earlier version. Not only do they reflect the fact that the Escorial *St. Lawrence* was executed on canvas rather than on panel (as was the Crociferi version), but they also exemplify the artist's more mature manner of painting. El Greco's fledgling oil paintings of the Adoration of the Shepherds (on various supports) reveal a related palette of red, blue, ochre and green, engulfed in brownish-black shadow, and an analogous, but also different, handling of paint. Animated and eventually just as personal, El Greco's technique of painting thus began to embrace some of the characteristics that would distinguish his mature manner, including the wide-spread representation of flickering lights reverberating off various surfaces.

Titian's great altarpiece also implies a spiritual conflict between light and darkness. David Rosand has convincingly claimed that a major literary source for Titian was Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend*, in particular the beautiful lines said to have come from St. Lawrence himself: "Mea nox obscurum non habet, sed omnia in luce clarescunt (My night hath no darkness. All things shine with light)."⁶⁹ Undoubtedly, El Greco also knew Jacobus de Voragine's useful compendium of stories about saints and selected Biblical events (which was frequently reprinted in Venice in the 16th century) and even appears to have applied it to the Kingston *Adoration*. Jacobus's text for 25 December (Christmas day) thus proclaims that Christ's miraculous birth was revealed to five categories of being—"to every class of creatures, from the stones, which are at the bottom of the scale of creation, to the angels, who are at the summit." In between are the plants and trees, followed by the animals ("Now the ox and the ass, miraculously recognizing the Lord, knelt before Him and adored Him.") and then the humans.⁷⁰ El Greco appears indeed to have recreated this hierarchy of revelation along the vertical axis of the Kingston *Adoration*.

As we have seen, El Greco's culminating witnesses, the sportive cherubs, mark a dramatic departure from the sedate choristers in the Modena *Adoration*, but here too Titian's Escorial *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence* could have provided inspiration, for in this version baby angels also appear at the top. When they appear in an *Adoration*, the ecstatic angels illustrate the stirring passage from the Gospel of Luke (2:13–14): "And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.'" But while Luke goes on to say that the angels departed *before* the shepherds left for Bethlehem, by El Greco's time a longstanding visual tradition routinely added the supernatural beings above the rustic stable. Rarely, however, were the angels depicted so ecstatically.⁷¹

One last detail of Titian's *St. Lawrence* (both versions) that could well have intrigued El Greco is the barebacked youth at the lower left who holds a torch and appears to be blowing on the flames. El Greco confirmed his fascination with this theme in Rome in the 1570s by painting what would become a series of canvases featuring a boy blowing on an ember to light a candle.⁷² As Jan Białostocki pointed out, these paintings are not just everyday scenes but also evocations of a classical text from Pliny the Elder.⁷³ The 1st-century Latin author had acclaimed a now lost painting by the ancient Greek artist Antiphilus of Alexandria (active 4th century BCE) of a boy blowing on a fire and of the light reflected on his face and the walls of the room.⁷⁴ El Greco's paintings of the Soplón are now widely accepted as emulations of Antiphilus's lost painting—perhaps prompted by the artist's own Greek roots and his association with Fulvio Orsini, the Farnese family's learned

librarian who owned several copies of Pliny's *Natural History*. It has not been stressed, however, that El Greco was already preoccupied with showing light reflected from various surfaces, including faces, and that it was an essential component of his nocturnal Adorations. Nor, it seems, has it been noticed that the same passage from Pliny had provoked Vincenzo Borghini, the cultivated prior of the Innocenti in Florence, to write to Giorgio Vasari in 1564 to exclaim that the ancient Greek painting was just like his correspondent's 1538 *Adoration* at Camaldoli (fig. 19).⁷⁵ An early work, Vasari's nocturne was also much indebted to St. Bridget's vision. There is probably no way of knowing for certain whether Vasari mentioned Pliny's passage to Titian when he visited him less than two years later (in May 1566), and saw the unfinished Escorial *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence*,⁷⁶ and whether the remark was then passed on to El Greco; but it can be said with assurance that, at the time, Pliny's passage was associated with more than just the subject of a boy lighting a candle.

So when and where was the Kingston *Adoration* painted? We have already seen that it must follow the Modena Triptych, and that it was likely done in Venice between 1567/68 and 1570. If it were part of the same project as the Heraklion *Baptism*, as seems most likely, the inscription of 1567 (or 1566) on that panel would provide a plausible date for it as well. Or that date would mark the beginning of its execution but not its completion, as the panel was worked on again some years later. Robert Simon first observed that the right-hand border of the copper now in San Diego (fig. 7) unmistakably shows the fortifications descending the hill and the famous Alcántara bridge in Toledo, best known from their appearance in El Greco's *View of Toledo* of around 1597–1599.⁷⁷ On close scrutiny, the Kingston panel reveals the same chain of buildings on the hill and part of the same bridge, again at the extreme right, behind the conversing female figures. It thus seems that El Greco started the Kingston panel in Venice around 1567, must have taken it with him to Spain and then finished it (or at least retouched it) there. According to a Spanish eye witness, El Greco routinely returned to his own paintings, reworking them time and again.⁷⁸ And in this case, the introduction of the glimpse of Toledo, his adopted home, may reflect an inclination to identify personally with the Biblical subject of the humble shepherds at the birth of Jesus Christ.⁷⁹

EL GRECO IN SPAIN

Once settled in Spain, El Greco found opportunities to paint the *Adoration of the Shepherds* for the rest of his life. One of his first contracts in Toledo was to paint a *Nativity* (*Natividad*), which he unmistakably interpreted as an *Adoration of the Shepherds*, as part of a larger commission for the high altarpiece and two flanking altarpieces in the Cistercian

Fig. 19. Giorgio Vasari,
The Adoration of the Shepherds,
 1538, oil on wood, 207 × 150 cm.
 Camaldoli, Chiesa dei Santi
 Donato e Ilariano.



church of Santo Domingo el Antiguo (fig. 20).⁸⁰ In this *Adoration*, he almost entirely eliminated the architectural setting and let shadow fill most of the space. More than ever, he contrasted the enveloping darkness with the supernatural radiance of the naked Christ Child and the heavenly incandescence that almost transfixes the spectral angels; with the natural glow of the candle held by St. Jerome in the foreground; and with the crescent moon at the upper right (just where Titian had placed it in his second *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence*). The two women beneath the moon resemble the conversing figures at the right in the Kingston *Adoration*, and again they may be the two midwives, but in post-Tridentine art they were normally omitted (since not mentioned in the Gospels), and El Greco seems not to have included any suggestion of them again.

El Greco's abiding affection for the *Adoration of the Shepherds* is conclusively



Fig. 20. El Greco, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, 1577–1579, oil on canvas, 210 × 128 cm. Madrid, private collection.

demonstrated by the selection of this subject for the altarpiece over his own tomb in the church of Santo Domingo el Antiguo (fig. 21).⁸¹ The choice is unusual, as his first altarpiece of the *Adoration of the Shepherds* was commissioned for that church, and the installation of two altarpieces with the same subject in the same church seldom occurs. The painting was one of El Greco's last (around 1612–1614) and most personal. Heir to a long line of *Adorations*, this altarpiece is both more spiritual and more human than them all. The flickering light from the newborn Christ Child now illuminates even the angels above and is more judiciously balanced with the elongated and eloquent figures, who themselves have attained greater stature in the overall composition. The figures have also acquired distinct individuality, conveyed through body type, gestures and facial expression. A case in point is the bearded shepherd with closely cropped, grizzled hair and bare legs in

Fig. 21. El Greco, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, around 1612–1614, oil on canvas, 319 × 180 cm. Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado.



the foreground, reverently clasping his hands and fixing his gaze on the shining Christ Child in front of him. This pious figure is often taken to be a portrait of the artist himself,⁸² and, if so, El Greco, as donor, was extending a custom that he would easily have encountered in Venice. Perhaps he was also emulating Titian, who may have shown himself as St. Jerome in the altarpiece undertaken for his own tomb in the church of the Frari in Venice.⁸³

El Greco's particular fascination with the Adoration of the Shepherds is further confirmed by the inventory of paintings left in his studio at his death in 1614. No fewer than eight were listed as *The Nativity*, which specialists agree must refer to the Adoration of the Shepherds. The number of paintings of this Biblical scene, which had continued to engage him since the time of the Modena Triptych and the Kingston *Adoration*, much exceeds that of any other subject.⁸⁴

Notes

1. I would like to thank Xavier Bray, Malcolm Cormack, David de Witt, Gabriele Finaldi, Charles Hope and Nicholas Penny for assistance of various sorts, generously provided during the course of my work on El Greco.
2. Havemeyer quoted in Weitzenhoffer 1986, p. 140.
3. Acc. no. 34-011; New York (Christie's), 31 May 1991, lot 58 (as attributed to El Greco); where purchased by the Agnes Etherington Art Centre with funds supplied by Alfred and Isabel Bader. For a rare mention of the panel prior to 2004, see William B. Jordan, in exhib. cat. Phoenix, Kansas City and The Hague 1999, p. 199, note 3.
4. London (Christie's), 8 December 2004, lot 91.
5. Cormack and Vassilaki 2005; Vassilaki and Cormack 2005a; and Vassilaki and Cormack 2005b.
6. Inv. 429.41.
7. See Stassinopoulos 2005; Aloupi 2005; and Danilia 2005. For a critique of much of the foregoing, and Vassilaki and Cormack's arguments in particular, see Hadjinicolaou 2007b.
8. The last digit is in a different material, as was revealed by hyper-spectral imaging; see Balas 2007. Andrew R. Caspar believes the date to be a forgery but that the year 1567 is plausible for the execution of the panel; see Caspar 2012.
9. Álvarez Lopera 2007, Kingston *Adoration*, p. 43, no. 10 (dated to around 1569), Heraklion *Baptism*, pp. 54–56, no. 18 (around 1569). Regarding the latter, Álvarez Lopera did not have the results of the technical examination carried out in Athens.
10. See exhib. cat. New York 2009–2010, pp. 33, 112–115, nos. 43 and 44 (entries by P. K. Ioannou).
11. For the documents, see Álvarez Lopera 2007, vol. 1, pp. 73–91. See also Panagiotakes 2009.
12. See, for example, Pallucchini, in Venice 1981, pp. 67.
13. El Greco also painted at least two variants of the Adoration of the Shepherds based on a 1567 engraving by Cornelius Cort (around 1533–1578), after a design by Taddeo Zuccaro (1529–1566); see Álvarez Lopera 2007, vol. 2, pt. 1, pp. 44–46, nos. 12–13, figs. 19–20.
14. Pallucchini 1937.
15. See exhib. cat. Edinburgh 1951, no. 16; Álvarez Lopera 2007, vol. 2, pt. 1, pp. 47–48, no. 14 (around 1570–1572).
16. Pallucchini 1952, pp. 53–56; exhib. cat. Bordeaux 1953, no. 14; Wethey 1962, vol. 2, pp. 167–168, no. X-10, as “Venetian School, around 1570–1580”; and Álvarez Lopera 2007, vol. 2, pt. 1, p. 44, no. 11 (as by El Greco [?], around 1569–1570). The painting appeared at auction in Paris (Palais Galliera), 20 March 1974, lot 31.
17. Soria 1954, p. 220, no. 53, fig. 228. Ioannou says that this painting may perhaps be identified with the Kingston panel; see exhib. cat. New York 2009–2010, p. 114. However, it is not arched and the dimensions are different.
18. Inv. 1990.104; Pallucchini 1986, p. 166. See also exhib. cat. New York 1988, pp. 67–72; and exhib. cat. Athens 1995, pp. 384–387, 546–547, no. 51 (entry by Terisio Pignatti). According to David Davies, “The version attributed to El Greco in the Museum of Art, San Diego, is very closely related to the Broglio picture in terms of composition but it is clearly not painted by El Greco.” See Davies 1999b, p. 156, note 15. Ioannou states that the San Diego copper and the Broglio painting are one and the same, but the sides of the two paintings are dissimilar, as is the brim of the hat doffed by the shepherd in the foreground. With regard to attribution, allowance should be made for the fact that the San Diego painting is executed on copper, which would normally cause a somewhat different appearance from works on panel or canvas; see exhib. cat. New York 2009–2010, p. 114. See also William B. Jordan, in exhib. cat. Phoenix, Kansas City and The Hague 1999, p. 199, note 3.
19. Bettini 1978, pp. 244–245; and Vassilaki and Cormack 2005a, pp. 236–237.
20. One recent attempt has focused on the Calergis, an Orthodox family living in Candia, but with close ties to Venetian patricians: Fatourou-Hesychakis and Hesychakis 2004, esp. pp. 35–43. The authors do not, however, discuss the *Adoration of the Shepherds*.
21. The literature on the subject is now abundant, but see Vassilaki, in exhib. cat. Heraklion 1990, pp. 156–185, 337–349, no. 4; Constantoudaki-Kitromilides 1995; and Dillon 1995.
22. For icons, see Passarelli 1998, pp. 85–108.
23. Schiller 1971, vol. 1, pp. 58–88, esp. pp. 87–88.
24. Chatzidakis 1962, pp. 57–58, no. 30, pls. 20–21; and Constantoudaki-Kitromilides 1999, p. 1224, pl. 1322.

25. Pallucchini 1937, p. 7.
26. Wethey 1969–1975, vol. 1, pp. 117–118, no. 79; exhib. cat. Washington, Dallas and Detroit 1976–1977, pp. 196–201, nos. 43–44; and exhib. cat. Florence 1978–1979, pp. 98–102, 359, no. 24, colour plate on p. 15.
27. Particularly to Jacopo Bassano, as in his *Adoration of the Shepherds* at Hampton Court; Rearick 1980, p. 372. Piero di Cosimo's *Adoration of the Shepherds*, formerly in the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum, Berlin, but destroyed in 1945, includes at the lower left corner a shepherd removing his hat with his left hand.
28. Bartsch 1801–1821, vol. 16, p. 7, no. 3; and exhib. cat. Boston 1989, pp. 9–10, no. 4.
29. Bartsch 1801–1821, vol. 15, p. 119, no. 39; and exhib. cat. Boston 1989, pp. 67–69, no. 31.
30. “Noisy” is how Pallucchini characterized the colour: “Il diapason dei contrasti cromatici, offerto dall’Adorazione dei pastori, è altissimo, si potrebbe dire fragoroso.” See Pallucchini 1937, p. 7; and exhib. cat. Venice 1981, p. 250.
31. Bettini, who astutely observed that the Modena triptych “riflette infatti una pittura veneziana ancora veduta marginalmente,” appears to have been the first to suggest that El Greco painted the triptych in Crete and then took it to Venice; see Bettini 1978, pp. 245–246. The Cretan provenance has also been supported by Wethey, who had earlier denied the attribution to El Greco altogether; see Wethey 1984, p. 171. Puppi considered that it was “very probably executed in Crete,” and that El Greco was “still lacking the benefit of direct experience with Italian painting”; see Puppi 1999–2000, p. 96 and 97. Pallucchini first dated the triptych to around 1567 in Pallucchini 1937, p. 10, and then to slightly later, but before 1570, in Pallucchini, in exhib. cat. Venice 1981, pp. 249, 251. For the fullest examination to date, see Vassilaki and Cormack 2005a, pp. 232–237, and Álvarez Lopera 2007, vol. 2, pt. 1, pp. 23–34 (around 1567–1568). Hadjinicolaou considers the work to date from “the very beginning” of El Greco’s stay in Venice; see exhib. cat. New York 2009–2010, p. 31.
32. Vassilaki, in exhib. cat. Heraklion 1990, pp. 156–185, 337–349, no. 4; Constantoudaki-Kitromilides 1995; and Dillon 1995.
33. See Álvarez Lopera 2007, vol. 2, pt. 2, p. 43, for many similar observations.
34. For a discussion of this and other changes related specifically to the Duke of Buccleuch’s *Adoration*, see exhib. cat. Madrid, Rome and Athens 1999–2000, pp. 369–370, no. 18 (entry by José Álvarez Lopera).
35. Hadjinicolaou identified El Greco’s analogous return to the engraved *Baptism of Christ* by Battista del Moro (around 1515–1573) in the Heraklion *Baptism*; see Hadjinicolaou 2007b, p. 260.
36. I am indebted to David de Witt, Bader Curator of European Art at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, for organizing campaigns of infrared reflectography. A first examination took place 16 October 2006 with Barbara Klempan; a second was held 9 June 2010 with Ron Spronk and Alexander Gabov using Queen’s University’s Osiris infrared camera, which was acquired that year through the generous support of Alfred Bader. The Osiris camera is outfitted with an InGaAs sensor and a 6-element 150-mm F/5.6–F/45 lens and is operational in the 900–1700 nm range. The painting was documented in a single (4096 × 4096 pixel) image.
37. Inasmuch as it can be ascertained from the available information.
38. Cormack 1997, p. 72.
39. Harris noted that the Duke of Buccleuch’s *Adoration of the Shepherds* must be among El Greco’s earliest surviving canvases. See Harris 1951, p. 313.
40. For the *Baptism*, see Aloupi 2005, p. 113. For the other paintings, see exhib. cat. London and New York 2003–2004, *Entombment*, pp. 78–79, no. 3; *Mount Sinai*, pp. 100–101, no. 10; *Pieta*, pp. 108–109, no. 14; *Name of Jesus*, pp. 128–129, no. 23.
41. It would be convenient to think that these paintings belonged to a transitional stage in El Greco’s technical development—and so date to a relatively brief and well-defined period—but that would be an oversimplification. Instead, stylistic and other factors imply that the mixed-technique panels were executed over a number of years, perhaps as much as a decade. For additional information, see Massing 2007.
42. In religious texts much closer to El Greco’s time, the metaphor of light continued to play a significant rhetorical role. The Second Session (January 1546) of the *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, which is known to have been (at least later) in El Greco’s library, thus begins, “The holy Council of Trent . . . recognizing . . . that every best gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights,” and goes on to say, “Moreover, since it is the chief care, solicitude and intention of this holy council that the darkness of heresies, which for so many years has covered the earth, being dispelled, the light of Catholic truth, may with the aid of Jesus Christ, who is the true light, shine forth in splendor and purity.”

43. Schiller 1971, vol. 1, pp. 78–80.
44. As stated to Isabella d'Este in a letter to her from Taddeo Albano, her agent in Venice. See Anderson 1997, pp. 17, 129, 149, 184, 294–296, 362 (documents). That in 16th-century usage *notte* does not refer to the Nativity, see Tietze and Tietze-Conrat 1949, pp. 13–14. A detailed history of nocturnes painted in Venice seems not to have been written, but a helpful preliminary survey was conducted by Nicholas Penny, who suggests that Giorgione's *notte* may not have shown an Adoration but instead an Aeneas and Anchises in Hell. See Penny 1990–1991, particularly, p. 23.
45. Its night effect was frequently emphasized in later inventories: “Dipintovi di mano di Tiziano finto di notte, la Natività di Nostro Signore” (inventory of 1692). See exhib. cat. Florence 1978–1979, p. 98.
46. See Humfrey 1997, pp. 56–58, figs. 61, 64, 66. In Lotto's *Adoration of the Shepherds* of 1530, now in the Pinacoteca Tosio Martinengo, Brescia, the patrons (two brothers?) are not shown as being presented by Joseph (as was Domenico Tassi in the artist's *Night Nativity* of 1521, now lost) but in the guise of two shepherds. See *ibid.*, pp. 131–135, figs. 135–136; and exhib. cat. Milan 2009.
47. Vasari 1906, vol. 5, pp. 249–250.
48. Identified by Von Hadeln, in Ridolfi 1914–1924, vol. 1, p. 145, note 6. Dated by Béguin to about the same time (?1521 or ?around 1527) as the Siena *Nativity*; see Béguin 1981, pp. 101–102. Humfrey dates Lotto's lost *Night Nativity* to the later 1520s; see Humfrey 1997, pp. 98–100, fig. 107. Humfrey's concerns that Marco Loredan is not actually shown on his knees are unfounded since Vasari states only that the Virgin is kneeling (*ginocchioni*).
49. In May 1544 Lotto sent a “Natività del Signor finto de notte” from Treviso to Venice, to be sold by the gilder Gian Maria da Lignago. Later that year he shipped a replica of it to the jeweller Lauro Orso for sale in Messina, Sicily; see Zampetti 1969, pp. 96, 97, 124, 125. Three years later, he painted “un presepio finto de note et la luce in Christo che illumina tutto il contorne” for the Murano glass blower Gian Domenico Serena; see *ibid.*, p. 192.
50. “Ed in casa Tomaso da Empoli in Venezia è una Natività di Cristo finta di notte, molto bella”; Vasari 1906, vol. 6, p. 507.
51. Vasari mentions Savoldo's paintings “di notte e di fuochi” in the Milan Mint; see *ibid.* Gilbert identified one of these paintings as the *St. Matthew and the Angel* now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art; see Gilbert 1991, p. 37.
52. Pino 1946, p. 146. Paolo Pino (active 1534–1565) had been a pupil of Savoldo.
53. Exhib. cat. Brescia and Frankfurt 1990, pp. 142–145, nos. I.17 and I.18 (entries by Renata Stradiotti and Elena Lucchesi Ragni, respectively). An *Adoration of the Shepherds* in Washington (inv. 1638) was identified as a variant (see Boschetto 1963, pl. 62), but its autograph status has been questioned by Fern Rusk Shapley, in collection cat. Washington 1979, p. 420, pl. 300.
54. Exhib. cat. Brescia and Frankfurt 1990, pp. 110–113, no. I.6 (entry by Elena Lucchesi Ragni). The kneeling shepherd in the foreground of one of the few earlier Venetian altarpieces showing aspects of the Adoration of the Shepherds (Cima's [around 1509–1511] in the church of the Carmine, Venice) may also be a portrait, in this case of the donor, Giovanni Calvo; see Niero 1965, p. 39; and Humfrey 1983, p. 162. A close autograph variant of the San Giobbe altarpiece, formerly in the Bargnani chapel in the Augustinian church of San Barnaba, Brescia, is now in the Civica Pinacoteca Tosio Martinengo, Brescia (inv. 75), and another signed variant is on the altar of the Scalera family in the Observant Franciscan church of Santa Maria la Nova, Terlizzi, Puglia; see exhib. cat. Brescia and Frankfurt 1990, pp. 106–109, 114–115, nos. I.5, I.7 (entries by Pier Virgilio Begni Redona and Elena Lucchesi Ragni, respectively). Nineteenth-century sources refer to a date of 1540 on the San Giobbe altarpiece, which is no longer visible. During conservation in the early 1980s a date of 1540 was discovered under the paint surface of the Brescia altarpiece; see Passamani 1985. In all three versions, the two shepherds at the window are nearly identical, whereas the shepherd at the left is treated differently (in the Brescia version he doffs his hat and in the Terlizzi version he is omitted altogether), further supporting the proposal that the shepherd in the Venice altarpiece is a portrait. See also Fletcher 2009, esp. p. 31.
55. In March 1547 Lotto repaid a loan to Schiavone; see Zampetti 1969, p. 155; and Richardson 1980, p. 8. For the paintings in the Carmine, see Richardson 1980, pp. 56–57, 148–151, nos. 240–242; and Gherzi 1996. The *Adoration* was flanked by a nocturnal *Annunciation* at the left and a nocturnal *Adoration of the Magi* at the right on the loft's parapet facing the church's main entrance. The loft was dismantled in 1653, but Schiavone's *Adoration of the Shepherds* was reinstalled on the Carmine's right-hand *cantoria*, where it remains.
56. A greyhound is not an unknown adjunct of the shepherds, as Vincenzo Catena's *Adoration of the Shepherds*, usually dated to the early 1520s, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (inv. 69.123) shows.

57. "Mà per ben goder quell'opera [specifically that under the loft, now lost] vi si converrebbe maggior distanza, distinguendosi per la vicinanza troppo le pennellate"; see Ridolfi 1914–1924, vol. 1, p. 251. Another canvas by Schiavone that would surely have appealed to El Greco is the *Adoration of the Shepherds* in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, inv. 47. Francis L. Richardson dates the painting to about 1560 and calls it "a direct precursor of El Greco's nocturnal *Nativities*"; see Richardson 1980, pp. 63–64, 184–185, no. 314 (not illustrated). Ellis Waterhouse astutely remarked that Schiavone was more important than Jacopo Bassano for El Greco; see Waterhouse 1930, pp. 67–68.
58. "La meyor pintura que ay oy en el mundo." See De Salas and Marías 1992, p. 103.
59. For Tintoretto's night scenes, see Rossi 1980, pp. 86–88; and Pallucchini and Rossi 1982 (especially on the relationship between Tintoretto's *St. Roch* and Titian's *Crociferi St. Lawrence*).
60. See Nichols 1999, p. 199. Although the newborn Christ Child is shown emitting rays of light, they do not (because they are supernatural?) illuminate any surrounding surface.
61. See Rearick 1980; and Ekserdjian 2007, pp. 174–177.
62. Although a portrait of an unidentified male donor is included at the left (along with Sts. Victor and Corona), he is not shown as one of the shepherds. For the altarpiece, see Rearick 1992–1993, pp. 120–122; and Livia Alberton Vinco da Sesso, in exhib. cat. Bassano del Grappa and Fort Worth 1992–1993, pp. 375–377, no. 46.
63. "Inventore del vero pingere delle notti in tela"; see Marucini 1577, pp. 59–60. Around 1558 Jacopo Bassano had painted a rare *Annunciation to the Shepherds* (National Gallery of Art, Washington)—supposedly a night scene, but instead, as Rearick observes, "an adventuresome effort at a dense dawn atmosphere"—which was frequently copied by the Bassano studio, and then rendered by Bassano himself as a true night scene around 1575 (Prague, Národní Galerie). Also around 1575 Bassano began to show the *Adoration of the Shepherds* as a nocturne and the Christ Child as the major source of light; see Rearick 1992–1993, pp. 102, 151–152, esp. note 329, and pp. 141–142 (where *Joachim's Vision*, around 1576–1577, at Corsham Court is called "one of the first complete nocturnes in Venetian painting"). In Rome, El Greco possibly saw Bassano's night scenes of the Passion mentioned by Van Mander, who was in the city between mid-1574 and early 1576; for which see Ballarin 1966–1967, pp. 192–193; and Ballarin, in exhib. cat. Bassano del Grappa and Fort Worth 1992–1993, p. 175. For Jacopo Bassano's *Crucifixion*, around 1575, oil on slate, 49.4 × 29.8 cm, in the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona, inv. 108373, see Da Sesso, in exhib. cat. Bassano del Grappa and Fort Worth 1992–1993, p. 398, no. 55.
64. Pallucchini 1937, p. 20, suggests that this altarpiece must have enthralled El Greco.
65. Wethey 1969–1975, vol. 1, pp. 140–141, no. 115, and vol. 3, Addenda, p. 263; exhib. cat. Madrid 2003, pp. 280–281, no. 57; and Checa and Muñoz 2003.
66. Hope 1980, p. 147. Wethey singles out the Escorial *St. Lawrence* as an influential night scene for El Greco but does not comment further; see Wethey 1962, vol. 1, pp. 26–27. Hadjinicolaou claims that El Greco's Heraklion *Baptism* is "the most important pictorial proof of [El Greco's] attachment to Titian"; see Hadjinicolaou 2007b, p. 270. As early as 1930 Waterhouse had perceptively summed up the situation: "There is no reason for doubting Clovio's statement that Greco had been a pupil of Titian before his arrival in Rome in 1569–70, though it has often been asserted that Tintoretto was more probably his teacher. Such a view, however, is both superficial and inept." See Waterhouse 1930, p. 66.
67. On 26 October 1568 Titian wrote to Philip II, saying that he had shipped to Spain a variant of another earlier (around 1516) and celebrated painting, his *Tribute Money* (National Gallery, London), although in this instance he had not first copied the previous version. Wethey 1969–1975, vol. 1, pp. 164–165, no. 148; and exhib. cat. London 2003, pp. 156–157, no. 32 (entry by Nicholas Penny).
68. Checa and Muñoz 2003, pp. 26, 89.
69. De Voragine, p. 441; and Rosand 1982, pp. 71–72.
70. De Voragine, pp. 48–50.
71. The child angels in the Modena Triptych's *Annunciation* display a similar acrobatic agility. They are directly based on an engraving by Giovanni Jacopo Caraglio (around 1500/1505–1565) after Titian's lost *Annunciation* of 1536, where the prominence of the heavenly figures was surely related to the dedication of the church—Santa Maria degli Angeli—for which the altarpiece was originally commissioned.
72. The best known (and perhaps first) of these paintings is the canvas from the Farnese collection known in Spanish as *El Soplón* in the Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples; see David McTavish, in exhib. cat. Ottawa 2009, pp. 304–305, no. 93.

73. Białostocki 1966, p. 592.
74. Pliny the Elder, vol. 9, 138, pp. 361, 363.
75. Frey and Frey 1923–1940, vol. 2, p. 101, letter dated 14 August 1564: “Scrive Plinio (eccovi la dottrina in campo), che fu molto celebrato dun’ pittore un fanciullo che soffiava nel fuoco, che quello splendore gli ribatteva nella bocca et per certi murj della casa, come la vostra notte di Camaldolj.” This would seem to weaken the Tietze and Tietze-Conrat’s argument that in the 16th-century *notte* did not refer to a *Nativity*; see Tietze and Tietze-Conrat 1949, pp. 13–14.
76. “[Titian] ha in casa l’infrascritte abbozzate e cominciate Il martirio di San Lorenzo simile al sopradetto, il quale disegna mandare al re Catolico;” see Vasari 1906, vol. 7, p. 457.
77. Exhib. cat. New York 1988, pp. 67–72.
78. “Dominico Greco traxese sus pinturas muchas veces a la mano, y las retocase una y otra vez.” See Pacheco 1956, vol. 2, p. 79 (Book 3, Chapter 5).
79. He introduced views of Toledo into some of his public commissions too; for example, the *St. Joseph with the Infant Christ* of 1597–1599 in the Capilla de San José, Toledo.
80. Álvarez Lopera 2007, vol. 1, p. 103, and vol. 2, pt. 1, pp. 129–130, no. 48. El Greco signed a contract for the paintings on 8 August 1577.
81. Inv. P02988. On 26 August 1612 El Greco’s son Jorge Manuel, also an artist, signed a contract for a family burial vault in the convent church of Santo Domingo el Antiguo, and he and his father took responsibility for the funding and decoration of the accompanying altarpiece. Álvarez Lopera 2007, vol. 2, pt. 1, pp. 233–237, no. 78; and collection cat. Madrid 2007, pp. 168–175, no. 26.
82. See Álvarez Lopera 2007, vol. 2, pt. 1, p. 235.
83. See Xavier Bray, in exhib. cat. London and New York 2003–2004, p. 216, no. 62. Such a relationship would almost certainly have involved a return trip by El Greco to Venice from Rome in 1576—as some scholars have already argued, beginning with Zottmann 1906/07, p. 67.
84. Wethey 1962, vol. 2, p. 25. El Greco’s special attachment to the Adoration of the Shepherds has never been satisfactorily explained. David Davies points out that the artist’s surname, Theotokópoulos, derives from the Greek word “Mother of God” and that the Virgin Mary may have been understood in her role as personal intercessor; see Davies 1999a, p. 199. However, this does not explain why the Adoration of the Shepherds should have been preferred over other subjects including her.

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Camaldoli, Chiesa dei Santi Donato e Ilariano: fig. 19

Municipality of Heraklion: fig. 2

Private Collection / The Bridgeman Art Library: fig. 4

Agnes Etherington Art Centre: figs. 1, 13, 14

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Prado, Madrid, Spain / Giraudon / The Bridgeman Art Library: fig. 21

De Agostini Picture Library / A. de Gregorio / The Bridgeman Art Library: figs. 3, 9

Album / Art Resource, NY: fig. 18

San Diego Museum of Art, USA / Museum purchase and gift of Anne R. and Amy Putnam, by exchange / The Bridgeman Art Library: fig. 7

Cameraphoto Arte, Venice / Art Resource, NY: fig. 17

San Giobbe, Cannaregio, Venice, Italy / Cameraphoto Arte Venezia / Giraudon / The Bridgeman Art Library: fig. 16

San Giorgio dei Greci, Castello, Venice: fig. 8

David McTavish studied at the University of Toronto and earned his PhD in art history at the Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London. He taught art history in the Department of Art, Queen's University, for nearly 40 years before becoming Professor Emeritus in 2013. McTavish was also Curator of European Painting and Sculpture at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, between 1986 and 1989, and served as Director of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre between 1991 and 2001. He has organized and contributed to exhibitions in North America and Europe, and has published on Italian, European and Canadian art.



In 1991 the Agnes Etherington Art Centre acquired a remarkable small *Adoration of the Shepherds* by El Greco from donors Alfred and Isabel Bader. For David McTavish, Queen's University Professor of Italian Renaissance Art and Art Centre Director at the time, this was the start of an adventure in tracing the work's origins to El Greco's early career, and more specifically to his first major transition from his native Crete to the artistic hotbed of Venice. Using investigative methods that include radiography and infrared reflectography, McTavish maps its position in relation not only to the artist's early production but also to Cretan art, Renaissance prints and works by Titian, whose ability to convey dramatic light and dynamic movement left an indelible mark on his young Greek follower.



Agnes Etherington ART CENTRE

